
Bicyclists look forward to Mass Ave bike lane

Posted by Your Town

November 21, 2011 05:54 PM

By Clare Coughlan, Globe Correspondent

Justin and Will have been inseparable ever since Justin found Will on the street with a cardboard sign that read "FREE." During their time together, they've both gotten a bit scraped up. But Justin remains loyal to Will.

Will isn't a stray dog or cat, but rather Justin's yellow fixed-gear bike.

Northeastern University sophomore Justin O'Connor is one of several thousand Bostonians who bike around the city, despite the danger of streets that weren't designed to handle cars, bikes and pedestrians. Like many cyclists, O'Connor has had several near-accidents, and two weeks ago he sprained his ankle while biking on Columbus Avenue.

"I almost get into accidents all the time," said O'Connor, a civil engineering major. "Usually it's with pedestrians, but I almost got hit by a car recently. I thought he saw me in his mirror, when he didn't."

But Mayor Thomas Menino is attempting to make Boston a more bike-friendly city. Earlier this month, Menino announced plans to replace parking spaces with a bike lane on Massachusetts Avenue. The move was heralded by many of Boston's bike enthusiasts, but angered some business owners and motorists in the area.

The bike lane is one part of Menino's plan. Since 2006, when Bicycling Magazine named Boston one of the worst places to bike, the city has added the position of "bike czar" — Olympic cyclist Nicole Freedman — to its payroll, created more than 40 miles of bike lanes, partnered with CVS and Walgreens to offer discounted helmets and introduced the Hubway bike share program this past summer. With the program, residents or tourists can pay to borrow bikes for a few hours or an entire day. The new bike lanes are just the most recent of changes for the city.

"Having dedicated bike lanes helps improve safety for everyone and reminds all travelers to share the road," said Katie Ward, a spokeswoman for Freedman.

As one of the main thoroughfares for Boston traffic, Massachusetts Avenue has seen its share of biking drama. Earlier this year a cyclist captured a video of a near-accident with a camera attached to his helmet. The incident made the local news after Boston police initially ignored the cyclist's complaint.

Safety is obviously one of the main concerns for cyclists — and rightly so. According to the city of Boston website, bicycle ridership increased by 122 percent from 2007 to 2009, and with that increase came more crashes. Thirty-seven percent of those crashes involved a car and 5 percent involved a pedestrian. Commonwealth Avenue was tied with Massachusetts Avenue for the street with the highest number of accidents.

"The biggest thing being done for safety is promoting awareness for drivers and safe riding for cyclists," said Parker Musselman, an avid cyclist and manager at Urban Adventours, a company that rents bike to individuals and groups for tours. "Bike lanes make drivers realize that bikers are there and that they have a right to the street," he said.

Ron Gluck, a lawyer specializing in personal-injury lawsuits, has seen the devastating consequences of

biking accidents. His firm, Breakstone, White & Gluck, has been involved in several cases in which the cyclist died or suffered from serious brain injuries.

"Inattentiveness is usually the primary cause, whether it be by driver or cyclist," said Gluck, whose firm is usually involved in several biking lawsuits at once.

But Gluck does not believe that the bike lanes on Massachusetts Avenue will help matters. "People are so accustomed to driving their automobiles in that part of the street. It takes people time to realize that they can't drive there anymore," he said. "I think it's going to be a battle."

With the Hubway bikes and the growing popularity of cycling, there are more cyclists in Boston than ever before. According to Boston Indicators Project, an online database focused on Boston statistics, "In Metro Boston, two-thirds of all trips made on all modes of transportation are under five miles, an easy distance by bicycle." In addition, in 2003, the most recent year for which statistics were available, the average Boston resident was stuck in traffic for 25 hours a year — a statistic that makes biking to work or class, even in the winter, seem like a viable option.

Despite his dedication to bicycling, Justin O'Connor, the Northeastern sophomore, seemed dubious about tooling around the busy streets of Boston.

O'Connor said "adopting" Will was one of the best decisions he's made in terms of transportation for quick trips around campus. But cycling down Mass Ave?

"I wouldn't trust riding around there much," he said.
